

Iraqi Media Watch: February 22, 2006

Current Translations from the Iraqi Press

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Al-Iraqiyya

Television, although it represents to a large degree the government position, is sometimes highly critical of it. TV has been focusing on the showdown between U.S. Ambassador, Zalmay Khalilzad, and the Iraqi government. In a high-profile press conference, Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Ja'fari strongly rejected the interference of the Ambassador, calling it a "meddling in the internal affairs of Iraq."

It must be stated here that al-Ja'fari was not among those who agreed to the war on Iraq. His popularity in Iraq is greater than any other politician. His selection for the next four years came against the hopes of the Americans, which was exactly what Moqtada al-Sadr had in mind when he backed him in the selection process.

The other developing story that dominated much of the recent coverage was the bombing of the Shrine of Imam al-Hasan al-Askari in Samarra (in north Baghdad). This shrine is very important for the Shia because it is the burial site for the 10th and 11th Imams and it is the place where the 12th Imam was believed to have disappeared in 874AD.

It is the only Shia shrine in a Sunni city. I remember visiting the shrine in the 1980s and recall the harassment by locals against visitors. This hostility was made even worse by the practices of the government of Saddam.

The assault against the shrine should not be portrayed as an offense to the Shia only. This place is a beautiful artifact and a wonderful accomplishment by some of the greatest artists. Its destruction should offend anyone with a sense of appreciation for art and beauty. Let's hope that this assault does not spark the anticipated fire of civil and sectarian strife.

Al-Rafidayn

This paper raises my blood pressure to the highest levels because of the writers' gross lack of knowledge about the basics of Arabic grammar—you can't go lower than that when it comes bad grammar.

It published a large number of statements from Sunni and Shia personalities denouncing the destruction of the shrine in Samarra. It also published a statement from the office of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani calling on the Shia to practice self-restraint and refrain from any retaliation.

The paper also quoted the head of the Supreme Council (SCIRI), Abdulaziz al-Hakim, as saying that the recent "irresponsible statements" of U.S. Ambassador Khalilzad gave the green light to the terrorist groups to practice their work in Iraq. He also said that the U.S. Ambassador "did not behave like an ambassador would," and he therefore "shares part of the responsibility" for the violence.

It also published an article quoting the Minister of Interior, Bayan Jabr, as saying that the story about the "death squads" is "a mere lie." He promised to reveal the results of a large-scale investigation about the story, saying that the "preliminary results show that the people accused of participating in these squads are innocent."

We shall see.

Al-Sabah

This paper published an editorial arguing that "the line between an ambassador and a viceroy, who is sent by his government to govern an occupied state, has vanished." Referring to the recent statements by Ambassador Khalilzad and his overt interference in Iraqi politics, especially "his conditions for the people who are going to take the top three ministries: Interior, Defense, and National Security."

Al-Sabah al-Jadid

This paper quoted Jalal al-Din al-Saghir, a prominent member in the Shia list (UIA), as saying that the formation of the government "will be delayed for a long time," citing difficulties in the negotiation process.

It reports on some good news on the reconstruction of roads in Najaf and the establishment of a large park in the Marshlands. The latter project is done through Italian funding. We need more good news.

Al-'Adalah

The paper reports that the Ministry of Oil will reduce the share of gas cooking from three tubes per family to two tubes. Great! This is the coldest month in Iraq. Many Iraqis use this gas to both cook and heat their rooms. It is a shame that Iraq is still unable to provide enough gas products to its citizens. The one thing Iraqis refuse to accept is to "sit on a sea of oil and still cannot satisfy their basic needs," as one Iraqi told the TV reporter recently.

The paper quotes President Talabani as saying that "the Iraqi government considers the staying of British forces as a necessity at this time." He said this in a press conference with the British foreign minister. British forces became very unpopular—not that they were popular previously—because of the beating of three Iraqi civilians, as a videotape revealed.

Baghdad

This paper's entire coverage for February 22 was focused on the destruction of the Shia shrine in Samarra.

Among its noteworthy articles is a statement put by the office of Ayatollah al-Sistani asking the Shia not to retaliate. He also asked for placing the Sunni shrines in Baghdad under maximum security.

[Al-Mu'tamar](#)

This paper reports that Saddam Hussein has ended his hunger strike. The next court session will be on February 28th.

It also predicts that the UK will follow the United States with a threat to cut any financial help to the new Iraqi government if the formation does not include certain groups, quoting U.S. Ambassador Khalilzad as saying that "the U.S. will not continue to pump billions of dollars to form security forces led by sectarian groups with a sectarian agenda."